

talkingpoint



Being a part of cafe society can get a little tricky when you have a food intolerance, discovers Sarah Wilson



Recently, I've taken to carrying around two slices of gluten-free bread in my handbag. It's so that when I go for breakfast or lunch at a cafe brimful with wheat-based banana bread, muffins and Turkish toasties I'm able to eat something.

You see, I'm one of those people who, when they eat gluten-laden products, bloats like a puffer fish, gets swollen joints and foggy of the head. Not nice. And, quite frankly, it's a rare establishment that offers food free from gluten. Or sugar. Or eggs. (All of which I struggle to stomach for various health reasons.)

So, at cafes I hand over my little cling-wrapped parcel, give the waiter a smile that says, "I know, isn't this just craaaazy!!" and offer to pay extra. Yes, extra, for bringing my own food! It's embarrassing, especially for a former food critic. But that's what life has come to.

Indeed, I'm told by waiters around town it's become quite a trend, this rice-bread toting thing. More and more of us are intolerant to standard cafe fare and are taking matters into our own hands.

In my local community magazine I read a letter from 'Richard', a chef groaning about people like me who head to establishments that provide lovingly prepared menus only to

demand special gluten-free, soy-substituted, meatless, peanut-eradicated interpretations. His point: stay at home if you're not happy with what's on offer.

I get his rant. But I'm going to pose a counter argument that probably won't win Richard over as a friend any time soon. It's possible cafe-style eating has actually contributed to this food-intolerance epidemic in the first place. Ironic? Kind of.

I mean, 10 years ago eating out was a once-a-month treat, if that. And intolerances were rare. Now, many people I know eat out three meals a day. And, hello(!), sensitivities to

wheat, milk, eggs and sugar have spiked. In moderation these ingredients are fine. Problem is, most food available outside the home is over-laden with them. Why? Because processed flour, sugar and bad fats are the most economical way to up the flavour ante, thus ensuring repeat business.

Personal trainer and digestive health coach Blake Worrall-Thompson says this gluten- and sugar-rich diet can damage the lining of the small intestine. "The more you hammer the small intestine with 'empty foods'

the more damage you do and the more intolerant you become," he warns.

Our bodies are finely tuned little machines that let us know when things are awry. When cafe food becomes too rich and no longer serves us,

up for a coffee' or 'meet for a glass of wine'. Anyone who's ever detoxed or had an alcohol-free month knows the pain of navigating a social life without these ameliorators. Says my repeat detoxer friend Zoe, "When

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our bodies react and make it impossible to continue eating it. It's that simple.

But back to Richard's suggestion that people like me stay at home if we can't eat from the menu. Call me bourgeois, but that's easier said than done. So much of our socialising revolves around eating out. Important events (birthdays, engagements) are held at restaurants, and we 'catch

you give up bad food and drink, you give up friends."

My tip to cafe owners is to start providing food that doesn't make us sick. People like me are passionate word-of-mouthers. We'll spruik your wheat-free menu far and wide*. In the meantime, I've started suggesting to friends 'we meet for a walk'. Or for 'a chat on a park bench'. And in my bag, I carry some sugar-free nut bars, just in case.

* For more information on places that cater to 'people like me', see www.sarahwilson.com.au, or for more on Blake Worrall-Thompson, visit www.rawsolutions.com.au